



THE UNIVERSITY *of* EDINBURGH

Edinburgh Research Explorer

Resistance and Resignation

Citation for published version:

O'Brien, D & Friedman, S 2017, 'Resistance and Resignation: Responses to Typecasting in British Acting', *Cultural Sociology*, vol. 11, no. 3, pp. 359-376. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1749975517710156>

Digital Object Identifier (DOI):

[10.1177/1749975517710156](https://doi.org/10.1177/1749975517710156)

Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

Document Version:

Peer reviewed version

Published In:

Cultural Sociology

Publisher Rights Statement:

Author(s), Article Title, Journal Title (Journal Volume Number and Issue Number) pp. xx-xx. Copyright © 2017 (The Authors). Reprinted by permission of SAGE Publications.

General rights

Copyright for the publications made accessible via the Edinburgh Research Explorer is retained by the author(s) and / or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing these publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

Take down policy

The University of Edinburgh has made every reasonable effort to ensure that Edinburgh Research Explorer content complies with UK legislation. If you believe that the public display of this file breaches copyright please contact openaccess@ed.ac.uk providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.



Resistance and Resignation: Responses to Typecasting in British Acting.

Abstract

This article draws on 38 in-depth interviews with British actors to explore the operation of typecasting. First, we argue that typecasting acts as the key mechanism through which the ‘somatic norm’ is established in British acting. It delivers an oversupply of leading roles for white, male, middle-class actors while ensuring that those who deviate somatically are restricted to largely socially caricatured roles. Second, we focus on the career trajectories of ‘othered’ actors. While they frequently experience acting roles as offensive and discriminatory, we demonstrate how most nonetheless reluctantly accept the terms of their ‘type’ in order to survive and succeed. Third, we focus on the minority who have attempted to challenge their type. Here we find that successful resistance is accomplished by carefully choosing work that subverts the somatic norm. However, the ability to exercise such choice is highly contingent on resources associated with an actor’s class origin.

Keywords: acting, typecasting, the somatic norm, cultural and creative industries, inequality, United Kingdom, social class, work, labour market, stereotypes

Introduction

In September 2016 the acclaimed British-Pakistani actor, Riz Ahmed, wrote a lyrical, funny and deeply troubling essay about his experiences of typecasting. ‘As a minority actor’, he explained, ‘you are intermittently handed a necklace of labels to hang around your neck, neither of your choosing nor making, both constricting and decorative’ (Ahmed, 2016). Delving further into how this ‘necklace’ is realised, he outlined how portrayals of minorities work in three stages:

Stage One is the two-dimensional stereotype – the minicab driver/terrorist/corner shop owner. It tightens the necklace. Stage Two is the subversive portrayal, taking place on “ethnic” terrain but aiming to challenge existing stereotypes. It loosens the necklace. And Stage Three is the Promised Land, where you play a character whose story is not intrinsically linked to his race. There, I am not a terror suspect, nor a victim of forced

marriage. There, my name might even be Dave. In this place, there is no necklace (Ahmed, 2016).

Ahmed goes on, mapping the connection between this racialized typecasting and how he is read, perceived and treated in everyday life. Recalling a baseless and unpleasant interrogation at the hands of a US immigration officer, he notes:

It was a reminder: you are a type, whose face says things before your mouth opens; you are a signifier before you are a person; you are back at stage one (Ahmed, 2016).

In these two quotes, Ahmed skilfully captures why typecasting – often considered a benign labour market sorting mechanism – contains particular sociological significance. First, typecasting organises the supply of acting labour according to deeply embedded social assumptions (about race, gender, class, age, disability and sexuality) held by playwrights, screenwriters, directors, producers, and casting directors. This skews the quantity, size and nature of roles available to different types of actors. And this, in turn, structures who is able to succeed. Second, typecasting is also important because of the role actors play in *representing* social and aesthetic reality; and how these representations, in turn, affect the ways audiences come to understand society. Typecasting thus provides a unique empirical setting to probe the core theme of this special issue – namely how possibilities of cultural consumption on stage, in film and on television are shaped and constrained by the workings of cultural production.

Yet while Ahmed's vivid, deeply sociological, account of typecasting follows in a long line of actors who have spoken out about the pernicious effects of typecasting, there is a dearth of empirical research on the topic, particularly in British sociology. In this article, we aim to address this gap by exploring the operation of the typecast in British acting. Our analysis proceeds in four stages.

First, we locate typecasting within a wider literature on inequalities in cultural work and explain how our conceptualisation of the term deploys and extends Puwar's (2004) concept of the somatic norm. Second, we draw on 38 in-depth interviews to explore how different actors experience the industry's imposition of a particular 'type'. Here we argue that the somatic norm functions not only by establishing the primacy of the white middle-class male actor, but also by clearly designating the somatic 'other'. This is achieved by ensuring that

actors who deviate from the somatic norm only have access to a restricted set of socially caricatured roles that they frequently experience as offensive and discriminatory. Third, we focus on the career trajectories of ‘othered’ actors, demonstrating how many reluctantly accept the terms of their ‘type’ in order to survive and succeed. Finally, we explore more closely the minority of actors who have attempted to challenge their type. We focus in particular on four female actors. Here we find that successful resistance is rarely achieved by challenging typecast in settings such as auditions or during productions. Instead, it is accomplished either by carefully selecting work which subverts or moves beyond the somatic norm - Stage Two and Three in Ahmed’s terms - or by moving into areas like writing or directing which offer the promise of reimagining and rewriting somatic norms. However, as our respondents illustrate, the ability to realise this promise is highly contingent on resources associated with an actor’s class origin.

Typecasting, Inequality and The Somatic Norm

Inequality in the cultural sector has attracted extensive media and academic attention in recent years (see O’Brien and Oakley, 2016 for a summary). Most of this work has focused on the barriers faced by women, non-white individuals, and those from working class origins. For example, in their recent collection of papers on gender and creative labour, Conor *et al* (2015) consider the barriers to female success, including the under-representation of women in cultural occupations such as film and TV, particularly in senior roles (Directors UK 2014). Similar discussions are found in the consideration of the role of race and ethnicity in cultural work. The key writers in this area such as Saha (2013, 2015) or Malik (2002, 2013) point to the barriers in cultural occupations for those from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic communities attempting to get in and get on, alongside the ambivalent positions occupied by those who do succeed. Both are critical of the rise and operation of the ‘diversity’ discourse within cultural organisations, and the way this often acts to displace concerns about how issues of race intersect with class and gender. Work examining class inequality in the Culture and Creative Industries (CCIs) has traditionally been less developed, but recent interventions have fruitfully redressed this. Key works have probed the classed nature of particular educational pathways (e.g. Allen *et al.*, 2012; Banks and Oakley, 2015;), the way the privileged often draw upon powerful social networks (Grugulis and Stoyanova, 2012) or the barriers to entry and progression faced by those from working-class backgrounds (Randle *et al.*, 2015; Friedman, 2016).

However, as yet there has been a lack of work that has tried to look at how inequalities in cultural and creative labour markets may be affecting cultural outputs and associated patterns of cultural consumption. We examine the example of typecasting – a labour market process which plays a pivotal role in determining the nature of outputs offered for cultural consumption. Typecasting can be defined in two related but subtly different ways. First, the term is often used to describe the process whereby an actor receives work based on their previous experience, such as an outstanding film performance or a long running television series, and then struggles to break the association with a particular type of character.

Yet there is also a second, more critical conception of typecasting that seeks to locate its *starting point* as a sorting function – i.e prior to rewarding experience. Here typecasting largely refers to the offer of work based on an individual's embodied characteristics – i.e that the roles they are encouraged to audition for, and that they tend to get, follow a set social 'type' that reflects demographic characteristics of age, gender, ethnicity, region, disability, sexuality and class. Thus while typecasting may appear to simply reward experience, or be justified in these terms (as in Zuckerman *et al*'s study of Hollywood 2003), this more critical definition would insist that typecasting is *rooted* in the embodied aesthetics of actors. As Wojcik (2003: 226) notes, 'typecasting is a political practice, not only as a labour issue but also as a touchstone for ideologies of identity'.

This understanding of typecasting has been explored by various scholars in theatre and television studies, as a subset of broader casting practices that structure these cultural industries. These authors have largely explored the *exclusions* that result from routine casting decisions, whether relating to the lack of Black actors in Shakespeare (Rogers 2013), controversies over the casting of East Asians in *The Orphan of Zhao* (Rogers and Thorpe 2014), the stereotypes faced by British Chinese actors (Knox 2013), or the barriers driving Black British television actors to seek work in America (Knox, Forthcoming).

This work is rooted in the disciplinary traditions of cultural studies, drawing from archival and secondary sources, or interrogating specific controversies. It is also primarily concerned with the British context, although the issues it addresses are also addressed in other national contexts. An obvious example is the USA, where sociology and law have offered important contributions critiquing Hollywood's casting practices and the consequent professional exclusions based on race. Robinson (2007) has charted the effects of racialised forms of casting, thinking through the legal implications of typecasting as first amendment protections

interact with anti-discrimination legislation in the United States. Using data from casting notices and IMDB, Robinson's conclusions highlight the effect of casting to 'assign people of color and women to low-paying and often marginal roles.' (2007:16).

A more specifically sociological engagement with Hollywood casting practices comes from Yuen (2016). Her work shows how typecasting operates along primarily racial lines, offering both opportunities and constraints; opportunities because there maybe a niche in the market for minority actors, constraints because, although all actors experience being cast to 'type' in Hollywood, the types available are seen through white eyes. Here the typecast available to non-white actors in Hollywood carries with it the assumptions, almost entirely erroneous, about non-white America and non-white culture held by a white writing and casting system. Minority actors carry a 'burden of representation' (2016:77), able to build careers but keenly aware of the real world impact of the negative portrayals of their communities within a 'racially hostile work environment' (Yuen 2016:81).

Our data largely supports Yuen and Robinson's analysis of typecasting in Hollywood. Yet while both, understandably, foreground race (and to a lesser extent gender) as their core sociological concerns, here we add an additional layer of complexity especially relevant in a UK context - the stratifying effect of class-origin. We thus first employ a complimentary approach that explores how minority actors – in terms of gender, ethnicity and class-origin – experience the imposition of a particular 'type' in their professional lives, and then we explore the particular ways in which resources flowing from class origin affects the ability of such actors to respond or resist to their type. To theorise typecasting in this way, we draw heavily on the work of Puwar (2001; 2004) and particularly her concept of the 'somatic norm'.

Puwar's notion of the somatic norm emerged from ethnographic fieldwork conducted in the British Senior Civil Service. A supposedly credentialed and meritocratic institution, Puwar observed that the civil service had very few senior staff with characteristics differing from a specific somatic norm of the 'white, male, upper/middle class body' (2001:652). Moreover, she argued that this somatic norm is so naturalised in the bodies of middle aged, middle class, white men, and so closely intertwined with the idealised conception of what it is to be a neutral, rational, objective civil servant, that it acts to deny any conception of this subject as classed, gendered and – particularly - raced. She notes: 'the racialised nature of white spaces,

structures and language is not so easily visible to white people, precisely because whiteness is defined as the norm and the standard neutral space' (Puwar 2001: 656).

At the core of the somatic norm, then, is the idea of whiteness as a default, with non-white ethnic and racial groups as deviant, different and other. Yet, Puwar is also keen to stress that the somatic norm functions in an intersectional manner, of the kind first outlined by Crenshaw (1993). Thus the norm is negotiated and experienced *intersectionally*, according to the classed, gendered and racialized characteristics of the persons confronting it. Indeed, those drawing on these ideas in subsequent work have emphasised intersections of class and race in the field of education (Bhopal 2015) or race and gender in social policy institutions (Hunter 2015).

Puwar was also concerned with how this dominant yet unacknowledged norm operated to exclude somatic 'others' from senior positions in the Civil Service. Open racism, she noted, was difficult to detect. Instead, the embodied presence of the black or female body occupied such a distance from the somatic norm that it gave rise to a series of more subtle assumptions and occurrences - dissonance, disorientation, infantilisation and invisibility - that served to illustrate the latent racism of the institution. In this kind of environment, Puwar argues, the only way for somatic 'others' to succeed is to engage in a process of 'mimicry'. Here she describes how some respondents were able to achieve *limited* success by deliberately acculturating the organisation's subtle but powerful codes of behaviour. Here there was a particular emphasis on modelling one's embodiment – in terms of accent, language, etiquette and deportment – on that of the dominant privileged, white, male majority.

While Puwar's somatic norm offers a powerful conceptual tool, it is also inescapably a product of the empirical environment in which it was developed. Indeed, we would argue that it is not a concept that can be straightforwardly and uncritically applied to other professions, as Puwar suggests (2004: 652). Instead, as we go on to demonstrate in this paper, its operation in the field of acting differs in two significant ways from Puwar's civil service. First, the somatic norm in acting is neither denied nor unacknowledged. Instead, the overtly embodied nature of typecasting ensures that all actors are acutely aware of how important their somatic characteristics are in structuring labour market opportunities. Significantly, this means that even the most privileged actors are at least partially aware of the structural advantages afforded to their playing type. Yet in another way – namely the options available to somatic 'others' - the somatic norm in acting is arguably more constricting. Even if these

actors desire the kind of ‘limited assimilation’ Puwar talks of, this is foreclosed by the constraints of their typecasting. Again this provides some subversive possibilities, particularly for those with the resources to invest their labour in acting projects aimed at challenging the somatic norm. However for the majority, who are struggling to forge a career in a precarious and uncertain labour market, this means accepting the terms of a typecast experienced as shallow and politically offensive.

Methods

We draw here on data from 38 semi-structured interviews with actors conducted between November 2014 and March 2015.¹ Interviews probed experiences of training and work, as well as actors’ family and cultural backgrounds. The topic of typecasting was also discussed explicitly, although such questions came at the end of interviews to increase the chances of the subject being introduced spontaneously. We sampled actors by placing an advert on social media asking for interviewees to take part and shared this with a range of acting websites and unions. This yielded 29 interviewees. We then used snowball techniques to complete the sample and match it to the demographic makeup of the British acting profession – in terms of gender, ethnicity, age and geographical location - in the representative Labour Force Survey (see Friedman et al, 2016 for more detail). For theoretical reasons, we also wanted a broadly equal proportion of actors from clearly advantaged and disadvantaged class backgrounds, resulting in 20 interviewees who had one or more parents employed in professional and managerial jobs (NS-SEC 1-2), 6 from intermediate jobs (NS-SEC 3, 4 and 5) and 12 from routine and semi-routine jobs (NS-SEC 6, 7). Respondents’ age, location, gender, ethnicity, parental occupation and pseudonym (all names have been changed to ensure anonymity) are detailed in Table 1. It is worth noting here that although our sample contains some diversity in terms of disability and sexual orientation – the number of respondents representing minority groups in these areas is too small to discuss them meaningfully in our analysis. This is a serious limitation as issues of sexuality and disability are clearly central in distinguishing the somatic norm.

Establishing The Somatic Norm in British Acting

All actors we spoke to explained that the work they receive is heavily subject to typecasting. Although we asked specific questions on the topic, most interviewees spontaneously

¹ Our wider project included 47 actors, but here we exclude 9 who worked in theatre in education (TIE) or who had only just begun acting, as here the issue of typecasting was much less applicable to their careers.

mentioned their ‘playing type’ before being asked directly. Particularly striking was the clarity with which actors were able to articulate their type, typically pinpointing its dimensions in a handful of words. This is illustrated in Table 1, where we display how all interviewees described their typecasting.

Most acknowledged that typecasting had a clear utility in the sense that it provided a set of defined roles where they had comparative advantage. However, in keeping with Robinson (2007) and Yuen’s (2016) work on Hollywood, there was also a prevailing sense among all interviewees that some ‘types’ were better rewarded in the acting labour market, particularly white, male, middle-class actors. Most attributed this to the overrepresentation of white, male, middle-class *writers* and *casting directors* in British film, television and theatre. Flowing from this skew, three themes were continually highlighted. First, an oversupply of roles for white, male, middle-class *characters*; second, that such roles tend to be broader, more complex and more multi-faceted; and, third, that they tend to be more central and therefore better remunerated. This skew in the supply of ‘types’ in British acting is formational, we argue, in establishing and designating the white, male, middle-class body as the industry’s somatic norm. To illustrate this, we want to begin by comparing how the experience of typecasting differs between our privileged, white, male interviewees and the other actors in our sample.

First, it is worth scrutinising in detail the CVs of two typical white, male, middle-class interviewees. Nathan, who is 29, grew up in South London. Nathan’s father was a CEO of a large company and his mother a retired dancer. He was educated privately, had studied at UCL and RADA, and begun acting professionally in the West-End aged four. A highly varied career had followed. He had played a range of leading roles in the Royal Shakespeare Company, London’s West End, primetime television drama, cult television comedy, Fringe physical theatre, and even a handful of operas. These parts also covered a wide array of characters – from a King’s wayward confidant in a Shakespearean play, to a gay Russian POW, to a housewife’s teenage lover. Sandy, 44 and also from London, had similarly diverse credits. The son of two high-profile actors, he had worked extensively in Hollywood and the West End, with leading roles including a lower middle-class clerk, a Bohemian king, an abusive husband, and a cocky schoolboy.

Yet despite the breadth of roles on their CVs, Nathan and Sandy both felt they were subject to a particular typecast:

It's always nice middle class. Always. All wonderful roles, but I do find it frustrating because there is a lot more to me as an actor. I would love to kind of be gritty and rugged, but I suppose I am a clean cut, middle class guy... But I would love to do something a bit rougher. (Nathan)

I haven't done enough different things... I'm sad not to have played Henry V; I would very much like to play Iago... I mean I've played a lot of aristocrats; and a lot of royalty. And other damaged posh people. Also some murderers, quite a lot of murderers actually. And serial killers. And only recently people with sort of hidden warmth which is nice. And very occasionally a romantic lead. (Sandy)

In one sense it is significant that both Nathan and Sandy express a certain frustration at their typecast, at shaking off what Nathan describes as his 'clean-cut middle-class guy' image. Yet at the same time it is worth noting the tone of this frustration, which was more irritation than anger. For both, the constraints of typecast were felt not so much as a barrier to success as a restriction on creative fulfilment, inhibiting their ability to express versatility as actors – to be 'gritty' or play a favourite Shakesperean lead. Indeed, unlike the civil servants in Puwar's (2004) study, there was at least a partial recognition among the majority of our privileged, white, male interviewees that they are the beneficiaries of acting's somatic norm. Thus Nathan connects his 'nice middle class' typecast to a set of 'wonderful roles' while Sandy concludes that 'any obstacles I've faced... I suspect they've been of my own making'.

The somatic norm in acting not only functions by designating the primacy of the white, male, middle class 'type', but also by clearly constructing other types as somatic 'others'. For the actors who deviated from the hegemonic 'type' – in terms of class origin, race and/or gender – typecasting was therefore a much more problematic process. This was for two main reasons. First, in terms of the acting labour market, there was a widespread sense that these actors had a much smaller pool of roles to choose from.² Moreover, female, working-class or BAME actors continually complained that the roles imagined for their 'type' tended to be secondary or minor, and therefore less well paid. For example, Aiden who was from a working-class background in the North-East of England, explained how his typecast – 'the cheeky Geordie' – always entailed a peripheral casting as the 'best-mate', the 'wayward boyfriend' or the 'comedy joker'.

² It is well-documented, for example, that there is less work for female actors in the UK (Thomas, 1995; Swanson et al, 2000; Dean, 2008) and an underrepresentation of roles for BAME actors (Brown et al, 2001; Hargreaves, 2002).

Second, and more significantly for this paper, these actors expressed anger and dismay at the *nature* of the roles they were cast to play – roles that they often felt were caricatured and politically regressive. For example, Lily, who was Chinese-English, described playing countless ‘offensive’ Asian characters portrayed as ‘funny because they don’t understand – me-speaky no-english – and you just think ‘oh no, not again’. Similarly Derek, from a working-class background in the North-West, explained: ‘I should have a police pension I’ve played so many coppers. Characterisations of other stereotyped playing types – most distinctly Stage 1 in Ahmed’s terminology – feature heavily throughout Table 1.

<Table 1 here>

Although nearly all female, working-class and BAME actors registered strong political objections to their somatic othering, there was also a prevailing sense that acceptance (however reluctant) of one’s playing type was a necessary evil for progressing a career in acting.

Surviving (and succeeding) as a somatic ‘other’

Puwar (2004) argues that somatic ‘others’ in the civil service can only succeed by mimicking the somatic norm – modelling their embodiment and professional practice on those white, privileged men in positions of power. In acting, however, the possibility of what Puwar calls ‘social cloning’ is largely foreclosed by the nature of typecasting. Here the embodied characteristics of acting roles are so tightly prescribed by writers and casting agents that actors whose demographic characteristics mark them out as somatic ‘others’ rarely get the opportunity to mirror the somatic norm. Instead, we were continually told, agents and other industry intermediaries encourage them to accept the terms of their typecast. Dani, 29 and of Moroccan origin, neatly captured this process:

I am a massive guy with an Arabic name so there is a particular type of part you go up for... I’ve played a lot of big foreign bodyguards, and terrorists, do you know what I mean? [Casting agents] will forever see me as that person so when I walk in and say I would like to play the Earl of Northumberland they kind of say ‘no, that’s not you’. In

fact it most definitely is. I can totally do that. So I profit from the very thing that kind of keeps me down.

Even though Dani feels perfectly capable of inhabiting the somatic norm - here symbolised through the Shakespearean character of the Earl of Northumberland - his own somatic characteristics, particularly his size and ethnicity, restrict him to 'particular' caricatured, racialized playing parts such as bodyguards and terrorists, an experience common in Hollywood as well as in the UK (Yuen 2016). And while he acknowledged that playing these parts had contributed to 'keeping him down' in a political sense, he also continually came back to the pragmatic 'profits' yielded from taking such parts. 'I've accepted I'm never going to play a leading man and so, for me, typecasting is a good thing', he concluded.

This tension between the losses and gains of accepting typecast was present in the accounts of most actors we spoke to. Many deployed a certain wry humour to navigate this unease, especially when explaining how their careers had waxed and waned according to 'fads' for stereotypes associated with their playing type. Faith, for example, explained that her career had been defined by the 'whims' of white, middle class directors and 'their conception of what it means to be black'. Thus while her lighter, 'more palatable' black skin had been 'fashionable' in the early 2000s, work had dried up in recent years as 'suddenly being black meant really dark skin and African names'. Similarly, Mia recalled her most successful as a period in the 1990s when it was 'suddenly cool to be Scottish, pasty and working-class'. And Ellie, 31, reflected on the 'absurd irony' of the fact that her longest period of continuous work had coincided with a weight loss precipitated by anxiety over not embodying the female body desired by high-profile casting directors: 'I got ill and started working. I lost loads of weight and loads of industry people were like 'you have lost so much weight - we are really worried'. But I started working.'

But while many actors talked with a certain knowing humour about the constraints of typecast – what Riz Ahmed (2016) figuratively termed the 'necklace of labels' - this acquiescence often came at a considerable emotional price. Jim, 46 and from Glasgow, provided a telling example. Jim's father was a van driver and his mother worked in the local pub. Against his parents' advice, Jim attended drama school in the city as a mature student before moving to London. He spent the next 15 years building a successful acting career but explained his enduring frustration at the way his background, and particularly his Glaswegian accent, was read by casting agents and directors, who eternally cast him as 'the drug dealer,

the drug taker or the violent odd-ball'. After a long line of these kind of roles in theatre, Jim had recently spent 2 years in a prominent television soap opera playing a 'tough, very working-class character who was also gay'. This, he explained, had played 'havoc' with his mental health. On the one hand the soap had provided the 'first real period of financial security' in his career, a period where he was 'finally able to do normal things like get a mortgage'. Yet the job had also involved a familiar battle with the production team over the depiction of his character:

They have this view of the world which is completely out of touch - it is all these middle class people making this working class programme and some of the storylines are completely ridiculous: you go 'my character did this, said this'. But they're not interested. I remember they told me not to take things so seriously – 'just go in front of the camera and say the fucking line'.

For Jim these long-running frustrations at the shallow depictions of working-class subjectivity represented a difficult bind. While at odds, politically, with such caricatured representations, his ability to reject such work - or even register partial objections or reservations – was undermined by the basic need to work, 'to pay the bills':

You have to play by their rules. I found that you just couldn't say anything or you get this reputation of being problematic, of being difficult, and then people see you as a risk

What was striking about talking to Jim was both his palpable anger at the constraints imposed on his acting career, and at the same time the profound helplessness he expressed about effectively challenging his typecasting. He had clearly been painfully affected by these experiences and yet, as with many actors we interviewed, loved acting ('this is the only job I've ever really enjoyed') and therefore saw typecast as a necessary evil.

Jim's example also illustrates how, unlike the civil service in Puwar's work, the primacy of embodied characteristics is so strong in acting, and the connection between embodiment and caricatured representation so powerful, that the somatic norm takes on a more immediate, visceral role in structuring the labour market. Somatic othering, in turn, becomes a normalised, almost banal, everyday professional practice; 'the rules', as Jim puts it. In this way, there was a widespread sense among actors that to succeed in acting, or even to simply survive, entailed a necessary acceptance and uncomfortable complicity with one's

typecasting. ‘I feel like a pawn’, Jim concluded at the end of our interview, ‘a pawn being moved around in exactly the way they want.’

Resisting Type

Although most of our ‘othered’ actors registered a certain resigned acceptance of their typecast, a significant minority had made active efforts to resist or reject their typecasting. In analysing such narratives of challenge, however, it was clear that only some actors had been successful. In particular we were struck by the way in which class origin, and the resources (or lack thereof) that flowed from an actor’s familial background, often appeared to shape their ability to resist. To illustrate, we provide an in-depth comparison of four female actors: two white actors from different class backgrounds, and two BAME actors from different backgrounds.

First, Molly. Molly’s father was a stockbroker, her mother an educational manager, and she grew up in an affluent area of West London. She was educated privately before gaining a place at one of London’s most prestigious drama schools, LAMDA. After finishing drama school she spent three years working full-time as an actor - auditioning for, and often being cast in, what she described as a ‘string of middle-class princess girl parts’. These were often central roles but, unlike Nathan’s middle-class *male* typecast, they encapsulated a much narrower set of characters:

They were all slightly passive, functional, pretty, females continually being chased around by interesting, complex, hilarious, men - and that was very frustrating.

Molly decided she wanted to ‘challenge’ this ‘pigeon-holing’ and after encouragement from a prominent playwright (who was also a family friend) she decided to start writing her own play. Moving back to her parents’ house in London and relying on their financial support to live, she took a year out of acting to write (and perform in) her own one-women play about female sexuality. She explains the premise:

I just thought, wouldn’t you just love it if you were sat in a theatre and a female character just walked on stage and said that. It was that need for female characters who contradict themselves and are surprising... so it was definitely an experiment and the line was always - ‘can we say that?’ and then always ‘yes - yes we absolutely should’.

And it was a thrill to realise how different it felt from anything else that I had been working on...because it did come out of a rage of, like, lets do something different, change the way people think about women.

Molly's play was thus a direct attempt to critique the somatic elements of her female typecast and produce a lead female character that directly confounded traditional representations of middle-class women. The play was a huge critical and popular success and went on to tour throughout the UK. It also directly led to Molly being commissioned to write, and perform in, a primetime TV comedy-drama series. While she explained that she still auditions for the occasional outside acting job, she is now much more 'picky' and writing has given her much more 'control' and 'autonomy' over the characters she plays:

I love how powerful you feel when you are acting in something where people really listen to you. Stuff that you feel is significant and important and changing things...I sound like some twat (laughs). But that is what is crazy about being an actor - people listen to you, they've paid to listen to you, they want to be affected. That is a platform that not many industries can claim to have, so yeah once that really clicked - that if you build it they will come kind of idea - it had huge appeal. Rather than the [typecast] look-at-me-in-my-dress-running-around-a-lake-kind-of-thing. Of course there's no guarantee you can make a decent living from doing it this way but that is the risk that you take.

It is clear that Molly has found a place in the acting labour market where she can very effectively resist the narrowness of her typecasting. We would not dispute that this is the result of much hard work and a writing talent widely recognised by industry peers. However, what we are particularly interested in here is how Molly could manoeuvre her career in order to express herself politically and 'cash in' on this writing talent. Most significant here are the familial economic resources that Molly could rely upon during this transitional period to both cover everyday living costs and the expense of staging her first play. Yet we would also stress the *cultural* resources that were inculcated during Molly's upbringing. She explains her decision to start writing:

I felt well prepped for it, it didn't feel like completely unfamiliar territory. I mean the work did but there was so much talk of theatre in my upbringing, and the rehearsal process and meeting actors and knowing through family people who had done it, I had heard the tales.

In deciding to challenge her typecasting, Molly therefore not only had her parents economic support and encouragement, but she also had ‘field-specific’ knowledge about how practically to pursue this artistic and political project that, in turn, shaped her perception of what actions were possible (Bourdieu, 1983: 349).

The contrast between Molly and Mia is striking. Raised in Edinburgh and then South Africa, Mia’s father was an electrician and her mother was a housewife. She went to drama school in Wales and had since built a fragmented but financially successful career as a film actor. However, Mia explained that her entire career had revolved around playing a very one-dimensional type of character. It began, she explained, when she played a heroin-addicted mother in a big-budget film:

After that I’ve always, always got cast as working class victims. Always. Put it this way if *Downton Abbey* was on then I would certainly be below stairs (laughs). I swear to god I have lost children about 15 times on-screen; the battered wife, the junkie or someone who has lost a child because of their badness or carelessness.

What was significant about Mia’s somatic typecast is that it was clearly classed *and* gendered. While she shared Molly’s exasperation at continually playing ‘passive’ female characters, as a woman with a ‘strong Scottish accent’ the working-class characters she had been offered were even more restricted. Indeed, she expressed a particular anger at the way female working-classness was either connected to crime or ‘victim roles’, which are ‘invariably dreamed up by some posh male writer’. Like Molly, Mia had taken active steps early in her career to resist typecast. She described ‘countless auditions’ for more varied playing parts that had all been fruitless. This experience, she concluded, had left her with the sense that the only feasible form of resistance was to turn down the roles she was being offered, to start the ‘slow process’ of changing casting agents ‘perception’ of her. But, unlike Molly, this option depended on outside financial support she simply did not possess:

I wish I could be more brave, and say ‘I’m not going to do that anymore, or I’m not going to take this unless you let me do it like this’. But quite often you are not allowed to be as brave as you want to be – especially if you’re trying to make a living in London. And I’m not exactly flooded with loads of other options at the moment, if you know what I mean...

In Leah's case, the somatic type imposed was gendered and racialised. Leah's father was an engineer, her mother was a teacher, and she was brought up in Nigeria until the age of 11 when she moved to England to take up a place at boarding school. Leah completed a first degree in engineering and entered acting without any formal training. Over the course of five years working as an actor Leah had developed a very distinct attitude toward typecasting. Although she acknowledged that her ethnic origin and gender meant others were continually attempting to typecast her, she remained confident about her ability to resist this process:

I had a coffee session with this girl who has done quite and she like berated me and said you should join this black agency, but why does it all seem to be around race? Why would you want that when we are trying to branch out.

Do you fear maybe being typecast as a black actor?

No because I am not going to let it happen. If I see a role I like I will apply for it and if I don't get it I am not going to think it is because of my race. A lot of my black actor friends, they're very much into black theatre. But I want something bigger than that. I don't want to just go for a role that says ethnicity black. I want to go for a role that says ethnicity any. The only barriers I see are the ones that I impose on myself. I'm not going to let [typecasting] limit me - I am in control of my fate.

What is clear here is the way Leah shares Molly's sense of self-efficacy. Although she may not yet have challenged her typecasting in the same way as Molly, her belief in her capacity to do so is striking. Again, though, it is worth noting how Leah envisages this resistance taking place. Like Molly she wrestles back a sense of autonomy by auditioning selectively. It's about choosing the right 'type' of work, she told us, about 'doing it for the love' even if that means 'not being paid'. Indeed, most of Leah's acting work to date had been unpaid. So to a large extent Leah's ability to resist her typecast, to act in the 'right' kind of work, was premised on an ability to survive in London on largely unpaid labour – a luxury not available to many actors.

Finally we turn to Deborah, 50, whose father worked in administration and mother worked as a retail assistant. Deborah went to drama school in Scotland before working for 10-15 years in the north of England. She explained that her typecast – which revolved around her

midlands accent, gender and mixed ethnicity - had come to be the defining, and ultimately limiting, feature of her acting career:

I am a black character actress and frankly there is not a lot out there for us. I've played a hell of a lot of nurses. I've played more nurses than there are in the whole of St George's Hospital.

In her mid 30s Deborah decided to be more active in resisting her typecast:

So yeah I started to get bored of that and I wouldn't take it if all I was saying was 'the doctor will see you in a few minutes...I just felt that kind of storytelling is not reflecting anything about my life as a mixed-race women'.

Like Molly, Deborah decided the best way to mount a challenge was through writing. Although she initially had some success as a playwright, she described hitting 'a lot of brick walls'. She described one telling turning point:

[A Major London Theatre Studio] asked me to write a play but then the reason the literary manager gave me for not even pursuing it was because another black actor, a male actor, had written a play that he said had similar themes. But it was a Pentecostal musical! I had written about a very middle class man and a working class black girl and their relationship and I just think that was too difficult for him to take whereas a Pentecostal musical...

... is what 'we' expect from a black voice?

Exactly. And that has been my experience as a writer, because you see the people who are commissioning work and you get much closer to smelling that white elite. And you say, actually, I would like to do this story about a middle class mixed race woman who is having doubts about who she is and where she is, but the ones that are always getting commissioned are the ones about the sink estate dramas, tales of African war, American black history and so the chances of hearing real black, politically black, voices in this country are still not being...registered

For Deborah resisting typecast was a clear political decision to reject the caricatured racialized and gendered roles that had dominated her career. Yet unlike Molly this project had been largely unsuccessful and, in Deborah's mind, had actually had a negative knock-on

effect on her career. In recent years she explained that work had ‘dried up’ and was now working almost full-time in a supermarket:

I do feel frustrated that my potential hasn’t been completely fulfilled. It is the lack of people seeing that ability in me, but also - you know - I don’t have that confidence that a certain level of class gives you. I don’t...I would rather squeak in a corner than go up to somebody and say I have got this great idea. It is that quality of not being able to push myself forward.

What is striking are the intersections of class, race and gender that play out in Deborah’s understanding of challenging typecast. While she locates certain barriers with industry gatekeepers who have consistently failed to recognise her artistic voice as a mixed race woman, it is telling that she privileges class background as the key explanatory variable. However, unlike Mia, it is not so much money that she identifies as the barrier. Instead it is a more diffuse sense of ‘confidence’, an absence of the necessary embodied cultural capital ‘to push’ her ideas forward in the bullish, self-assured manner demonstrated earlier by Molly and Leah.

Conclusion

Midway through his 2016 essay on typecasting, Riz Ahmed notes that he has so far ‘avoided’ reductive ‘Stage 1’ typecasting. His CV is instead littered with roles critically-acclaimed for challenging, or moving beyond, conventional Asian stereotypes. Ahmed discards this modestly as a matter of luck. Many others (including ourselves) would be quick to add talent. Yet it is also worth speculating on what is left unsaid in Ahmed’s essay. The son of a shipping broker, Ahmed won a scholarship to a top private school before studying politics, philosophy and economics at Oxford. We mention this not to explain away his success, or to undermine his critique of typecasting. We mention it because, as the final section of this article has illustrated, understanding precisely how actors like Ahmed have avoided and challenged their type (and why others have not) is pivotal in connecting typecasting to wider patterns of inequality in cultural work. Of course we are unable to determine whether Ahmed’s avoidance of typecasting is the result of parental support, networks, or a confidence acquired through his privileged education. But our findings certainly suggest that such

resources are central in explaining the strategies of resistance employed by some actors and the reluctant resignation of others.

Our analysis is not just about who can and who cannot resist typecasting, however. More generally we have demonstrated that while typecasting may masquerade as a neutral sorting mechanism that provides every actor with a clear set of opportunities and restrictions, it is not experienced in this way by actors themselves. Instead, our interviewees were clear that typecasting disproportionately rewards privileged white, male actors, who can take advantage of the larger share of central, more complex roles imagined for their type. In contrast, actors who deviate from the somatic norm are restricted to a set of largely caricatured roles that they experience as offensive and discriminatory. Moreover, this somatic othering proceeds in an *intersectional* manner, with those situated furthest from the somatic norm often facing the greatest barriers to success.

It is worth acknowledging that our analysis is not without limitations. As Percival and Hesmondhalgh (2014) have demonstrated, there are important differences in production systems, working patterns and attitudes between film and TV (and also theatre), which may be obscured in our analysis of actors as a whole. In particular, following Robinson (2007), it may well be that the physical characteristics sought for roles, as specified in casting notices, differ by industry. A comparison of typecasting in these different sectors, noting the different labour market practices, represents an obvious area for further research.

Nonetheless we believe our findings have wider implications for scholars in cultural sociology. First, our work points toward the urgent need for more research on those playwrights, screenwriters, directors, and casting directors responsible for *producing* the types explored here. As our analysis indicates, actors consider themselves relatively powerless in relation to these producers and intermediaries. They are largely ‘pawns’ when it comes to typecasting, as Jim put it, reactively carrying out the aesthetic vision of others. In this way, it is hugely important to understand how and why these professionals, who are often hidden from public view, make the choices they do when writing stories, constructing characters and matching bodies with roles, and what social assumptions may underlie their decisions. The work of Robinson (2007:8) and Yuen (2016) have skilfully elucidated the role such gatekeepers play in Hollywood, and their practice in a UK context is excellent territory for further, specifically sociological, work.

Second, we hope this work illustrates the value of importing Puwar's concept of the somatic norm into fields of cultural work – particularly those like acting (but also dance, music, comedy, opera) that have the somatic built into the very fabric of frontline work. However, we would stress that doing so necessitates a critical engagement with Puwar's work. In particular, our research illustrates that in performing arts fields the somatic norm, and its relative power, is likely to differ in important ways from Puwar's original conception. In acting, for example, there is more scope for challenge and subversion because the somatic norm is widely recognised, even among those who benefit from its operation. This is particularly the case for those with the resources offered by class position. Recognition does not necessarily lead to subversion, of course, but further encouraging (even demanding) this reflexivity among the privileged may represent a fruitful avenue for promoting somatic alterity in the future. Yet at the same time the somatic norm in acting is also perhaps more restrictive. A typecasting often experienced as a constrictive 'necklace of labels', combined with the perils an unforgiving labour market, leaves most actors with a sense that they have no choice but to accept the terms of the somatic norm.

References

- Ahmed, R. (2016) 'Typecast as a Terrorist' in Shukla, N (ed) *The Good Immigrant* London: Cornerstone
- Allen K, Quinn K, Hollingworth S, and Rose, A (2013) Becoming Employable students and 'ideal' creative workers: exclusion and inequality in higher education work placements, *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 34 (3) 431-452
- Banks M and Oakley K (2015) Class, UK Art Workers and the Myth of Mobility. In: Maxwell R (2015) *The Routledge Companion to Labour and Media*. New York: Routledge.
- Bhopal, K. (2014) *The experience of BME academics in higher education: aspirations in the face of inequality* London: Leadership Foundation for Higher Education
- Conor B, Gill R and Taylor S (2015) *Gender and Creative Labour*. London: Wiley-Blackwell
- Crenshaw, K. (1991) 'Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color' *Stanford Law Review* 43: 6 1241-1299
- Directors UK (2014) *Women Directors – Who's Calling the Shots?* Available from https://d29dqxe14uxvcr.cloudfront.net/generic_file_content_rows/file_1s/000/001/342/origin

[al/Women_Directors_-_Who's_Calling_the_Shots_-_a_report_by_Directors_UK_8_May_2014.pdf?1437664279%20accessed%2028/9/2016](#)

Friedman, S., O'Brien, D., Laurison, D. (2016) '“Like skydiving without a parachute”: How Class Origin Shapes Occupational Trajectories in British Acting', *Sociology* (published online before print 28 Feb - <http://soc.sagepub.com/content/early/2016/02/26/0038038516629917.abstract>)

Friedman, S. (2016) 'Habitus Clivé and the Emotional Imprint of Social Mobility', *Sociological Review* 64 (1) 129-148

Hunter, S. (2015) *Power, Politics and the Emotions: Impossible Governance* London: Routledge

Gill R (2014) Unspeakable Inequalities: Post Feminism, Entrepreneurial Subjectivity, and the Repudiation of Sexism among Cultural Workers. *Social Politics* 21(4), 509-528.

Grugulis I and Stoyanova D (2012) Social Capital and Networks in Film and TV: Jobs for the Boys? *Organisation Studies* 33: 1311-1331

Knox, S. (2013) 'Representations of British-Chinese Identities in British TV Drama: Mapping the Hidden Field' Paper Presented at MECCSA 2014, Bournemouth University 2014

Knox, S. (forthcoming) 'Exploring the casting of British and Irish actors in contemporary US film and television' for Hogg, C. and Cantrell, T. (eds.). *Exploring television acting*, Bloomsbury.

Malik, S. (2002) *Representing black Britain: Black and Asian images on Television*. Sage Publications Ltd

Malik S (2013) Creative Diversity: UK Public Service Broadcasting After Multiculturalism. *Popular Communication* 11 (3): 227-241.

O'Brien, D. and Oakley, K. (2016) cultural value and inequality: a critical literature review, *Arts and Humanities Research Council*

Puwar, N (2001) 'The racialised somatic norm and the Senior Civil Service' *Sociology* 35:3 651-670

- Puwar N (2004) *Space Invaders: Race, Gender and Bodies out of Place* London: Berg.
- Percival, N. and Hesmondhalgh, D. (2014) 'Unpaid work in the UK television and film industries: Resistance and changing attitudes' *European Journal of Communication* 2014, Vol. 29(2) 188–203
- Randle K, Forson C, Calveley M (2015). Towards a Bourdieusian analysis of the social composition of the UK film and television workforce. *Work, Employment and Society*. 29 (4): 590-606
- Robinson, R. (2007) "Casting and Caste-ing: Reconciling Artistic Freedom and Antidiscrimination Norms" 95 Cal. L. Rev. (2007)
- Rogers, J. (2013) 'The Shakespearean Glass Ceiling: the State of Colorblind Casting in Contemporary British Theatre' *Shakespeare Bulletin* 31(3) 405-430
- Rogers, A. and Thorpe, A. (2014) A Controversial Company: Debating the Casting of the RSC's *The Orphan of Zhao* *Contemporary Theatre Review* 24:4 428-435
- Saha, A. (2013) "'Curry Tales': The production of race and ethnicity in the cultural industries'. *Ethnicities*, 13:6 818-837
- Saha, A. (2015) The marketing of race and ethnicity in the cultural industries. In: Justin Connor and Kate Oakley, eds. *The Routledge Companion to the Cultural Industries*. London: Routledge
- Wojcik, P (2003) 'Typecasting' *Criticism* 45: 2 223-249
- Yuen, N. (2016) *Reel Inequality: Hollywood Actors and Racism* London: Rutgers University Press.
- Zuckerman, E., Kim, T., Ukanwa, K., von Rittman, J. 'Robust Identities or Nonentities? Typecasting in the Feature-Film Labor Market' *American Journal of Sociology* 108:5 1018–74